

Royal Yachts: their role over 300 years and their future

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The Royal Yacht *Britannia* was launched by the Queen on 16 April 1953 amid talk of a new Elizabethan era. Certainly the concept of royal yachts looked backwards to a glorious past. At a time of post-war austerity, the launch of a brand new royal yacht was a powerful symbol of a resurgent Britain.

The *Britannia* was the seventy-fifth royal yacht since the reign of King Charles II. However, it was only in the nineteenth century that royal yachts began to be used on a large scale for royal diplomacy, rather than as private sporting and recreational vessels.

A former coastal trader, the brig *Surprise*, in which King Charles II had fled to France to escape his enemies, was commissioned after the Restoration as a fifth rate line of battle ship, and permanently moored on the Thames, as the *Royal Escape*. This vessel has been called the first royal yacht. The expression yacht was used at this time for a small ship dedicated neither to commerce nor to war, but existing simply for pleasure.

The first true royal yacht was however the *Mary*, a Dutch-built ship used mostly as an "advice boat", carrying orders and dispatches for other fighting ships, when not used by the king as a pleasure boat. It was in fact King Charles II and his brother, James Duke of York (later King James II) who invented the sport of yacht racing.

Over the next one hundred and fifty years the royal yachts grew in size, until 1817, when the 325 tonne *Royal George* was built for the Prince Regent (later King George IV). When she was not being used by the prince, her crew were transferred to a ten-gun brig, the *Pantaloon*, which was used for mail and fisheries protection duties. Like royal yachts before and since, the *Royal George* enjoyed a long career, and was not finally laid up until 1902, when she was the oldest royal yacht in the world, and third oldest ship in the Royal Navy. She was broken up in 1905, and many of her fittings were transferred to her successor.

The *Royal George* was the last of the all-sail royal yachts, apart from small sporting vessels. The age of steam arrived with the yacht *Victoria and Albert*, which was built in 1843 for Queen Victoria. In the course of her long reign the Queen saw a total of seven steamers built as royal yachts. These vessels were built during the heyday of the royal yacht, when the British yachts competed for speed, comfort and elegance with the yachts of the German and Russian emperors.

The third *Victoria and Albert*, launched 1899 and commissioned 1901, was the last royal yacht built before *Britannia*. The *Victoria and Albert* undertook some 60 voyages before 1914, but after the Great War battleships or cruise liners were increasingly used for royal visits overseas, with the *Victoria and Albert* confined to duty in home waters. Already very elderly, she went into reserve upon the outbreak of war in 1939, having last been employed on a cruise to the west country early in that year. After serving some years as an accommodation hulk for the naval shore establishment HMS *Excellent*, the *Victoria and Albert* was finally broken up 1955.

The three *Victoria and Albert's* seldom strayed far from the English Channel or North Sea. Royal visits further afield employed naval vessels, or chartered passenger liners. Royal tours beyond Europe were a rarity, and essentially only date from 1860. In that year, Edward Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, on his first overseas tour, travelled on the screw-driven battleship *Hero* to North America. In 1875-76 he visited India on HM Troopship *Serapis*, escorted by three frigates. The then current royal yacht, the *Victoria and Albert* (II) was not deemed sufficiently large to undertake such a long cruise safely, and Queen Victoria was reluctant to lend it for such a purpose.

The acquisition of a new royal yacht was approved by the Cabinet in 1938, due to the increasing impracticality of using the *Victoria and Albert* for cruises abroad. The plan had however to be abandoned due to the outbreak of war the following year.

The first inter-continental voyage by a reigning sovereign was to take place as late as the middle of the present century. In 1939 King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (now the Queen Mother) visited Canada and the United States of America on the chartered Canadian Pacific Line steamship the *Empress of Australia*. They were to have used the battleship *Repulse*, but the prospect of war made her use as a royal yacht inappropriate. In the event, she did escort the royal yacht half way across the Atlantic, and escorted her home again afterwards.

King George VI visited Allied forces in North Africa in 1943, flying from Britain on the Avro York normally used by the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Ironically, the first royal crossing of the Atlantic by ship was to occur only a few years before the first inter-continental flight by a reigning sovereign.

In 1946-47 the Royal Family visited South Africa on HMS *Vanguard*, the last, and largest, British battleship. This was also to be the last time that a major warship was used as the primary transport on a royal tour

In 1951 the Princess Elizabeth (now Her Majesty the Queen) and the Duke of Edinburgh flew to Canada on a BOAC Stratocruiser aircraft. In January 1952 they commenced what was planned to be a five-month tour of the Commonwealth and Empire. They flew to Africa, and were due to meet the Shaw Saville and Albion liner *Gothic* at Mombassa, for the second part of the tour. However, the death of King George VI in February 1952 brought the tour to a premature end.

In 1951 a new royal yacht was announced. The vessel was to have the dual function of royal yacht and naval hospital ship. The royal apartments were designed for conversion within 24 hours into wards for over 200 patients. King George VI felt that he would still require a sea-going royal yacht to carry out his world-wide commitments, both as king and as Head of the Commonwealth. However, changed conditions meant that a dedicated royal yacht would be difficult to justify.

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The brief to Sir Victor Shepheard, the Admiralty's Director of Naval Construction, was to build a vessel of robust design and with an ocean-going capability. The chosen design was based upon that of the North Sea ferries *Arnhem* and *Amsterdam*.

The new yacht's lines were sleek, giving her the appearance of a much larger vessel than she actually was. As a non-combatant ship, *Britannia* could be built to merchant vessel standards, rather than to the stricter naval construction standards. Internal butt straps were used to enhance the ship's external appearance, with the elimination of external welding or rivets. Aluminium alloy was used in the superstructure above the bridge deck, and for the funnels. Steel was used elsewhere in the interests of economy.

The traditional swan bow and counter stern used on earlier royal yachts were replaced on the *Britannia* with a modern clipper bow and modified cruiser stern. The clipper bow was credited with improving the yacht's speed by half a knot. An air conditioning plant was also included, this being of importance for the vessel's role as hospital ship, as well as in tours of tropical regions.

The *Britannia* displaced 3,927 tonnes standard and 5,678 tonnes full. Her length was 109.7m at the keel, 115.8m at the waterline, and 125.6m overall. The beam was 16.7m. The mean draught was 5.2m, with a minimum draught of 4.8m. *Britannia* had a range of 3,675 nautical miles on oil fuelled engines at 14 knots; 2,800 nautical miles at 20 knots.

The royal yacht carried 189 permanent crew, including 14 officers. The full complement was 282 (including 21 officers) until 1993, when it was reduced to 225. All royal yachts since 1901 have carried a Royal Marines band when on overseas tours.

In order to maintain a suitable degree of continuity, many fittings were salvaged from earlier royal yachts, particularly the last *Victoria and Albert*. This also helped to keep the cost as low as possible, an important consideration in a time of post-war austerity.

The ship's Royal apartments were built to cater for 250 guests. Accommodation was also provided for some 50 staff and guests, while the ship could carry up to 16 guests, 14 Royal Household and 30 staff for a major overseas trip.

Commissioned 7 January 1954 amid much speculation about the name for the new vessel, the *Britannia* was a unique royal residence, serving both as an ambassadorial vehicle for the royal family overseas, or in home waters, and as a venue for social occasions at sea. It was never intended to be, nor was she ever used as, a pleasure craft, but rather as a royal palace. She enabled the Queen to host receptions on overseas visits on what amounted to British territory, reception which otherwise might have had to be held in local hotels. This was good from a security viewpoint, and was much more convenient. The *Britannia* was a more prestigious venue than any hotel or embassy could ever be.

The *Britannia* has steamed over one million nautical miles since her completion in 1954. She enabled the Queen to reach many otherwise inaccessible places. By 1995 the Queen had used the royal yacht for 85 state visits, and Her Majesty and other members of the Royal Family had used her for many hundreds of other visits.

In addition to serving as royal yacht, and being available as an emergency hospital ship, from 1968 the *Britannia* was used on naval exercises, in roles such as submarine target, guest platform, merchant ship type, or convoy commodore's flagship. She also routinely conducted hydrographic surveys in the course of her many oceanic voyages.

A more recent development was the use of *Britannia* for the promotion of British commercial interests. This took the form of "sea days", where business seminars were held for overseas business and political leaders. It has been estimated that these business events generated some £500m (NZ\$1,200m) of exports annually.

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Royal Yachts Overseas

There are a number of royal yachts in use throughout the world today, as well as a number of yachts used by presidents of republics.

In Denmark, the royal yacht *Dannebrog* is used for visits to the various islands which make up much of the country, as well as providing a means of visiting neighbouring countries. Commissioned in 1932, she displaces 1,112 tonnes, and is 75m overall. Although carrying 57 crew, she is essentially not an ocean-going vessel, her voyages being confined to the North Sea. Despite her advanced age, the question of a replacement has yet to be settled.

The Norwegian navy operates the royal yacht *Norge*. This was commissioned 1946, at a cost of £250,000. She was originally built in 1937 for Sir Thomas Sopwith. Somewhat larger than the *Dannebrog*, she displaces 1,659 tonnes gross, is 80m overall, and carries 34 crew. The *Norge* has been used for state visits to Britain, but again her ocean-going capability is limited.

The newest of several royal yachts used by the King of Saudi Arabia is the *Abdul Aziz*. Commissioned in 1984, she cost £100m (NZ\$236m), in 1997 terms considerably more than is being allowed for the proposed replacement for the *Britannia*. Displacing 1,450 tonnes dead weight, and measuring 147.1m overall, she operates with a crew of 65.

Oman operates the *Al Said* as a royal yacht. Commissioned in 1982, she is one of the few modern yachts of a size comparable to that of the *Britannia*. She displaces 4,443 tonnes gross, is 103.7m long, and has 156 crew. Whilst she is of a similar size to the proposed new British yacht, the *Al Said*, like her counterparts in Saudi Arabia, was built more as an expression of regal splendour and wealth than as a working royal residence.

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A replacement for HMY *Britannia*

Britannia was undoubtedly a success, both as royal yacht, and in her later cautious forays into international commerce and business. But, due to her advancing age, the ship had become increasingly costly to maintain and refit. Until converted in 1983-84 to run on diesel, *Britannia* ran on oil fuel. Had she been sent to the South Atlantic in 1982 she would have needed her own tanker, as the rest of the Fleet by then used diesel oil. The potential cost of a refit required to return her to royal duty after service as a hospital ship (£50-60m in 1982 prices (NZ\$118-142m)) meant that she was never used in that role.

A review of the royal yacht was announced on 26 January 1993. This led, perhaps unsurprisingly, to the announcement on 2 February 1993, that the hospital ship role had been abandoned. On 23 June 1994 it was announced that *Britannia* was to be withdrawn from service in July 1997, and would not undergo the £17m (NZ\$40m) five-yearly refit which had been scheduled for 1996. It was hoped that she might continue in a useful role, though not sea-going, and to this end, tenders were invited by 31 September 1995 for her sale or conversion to a public attraction.

The *Britannia* was to be decommissioned in December 1997, after a seven-month cruise, which will include attending the hand-over of Hong King to Communist China, and hosting some 80 commercial functions. After almost forty-four years in service, the *Britannia* had certainly earned her retirement.

Whilst few monarchies outside the oil-rich Middle East have bought royal yachts in recent decades, there is every reason for the British monarch to retain such a vessel. As Queen of many independent countries, as well as quite a number of remaining dependencies, and as Head of the Commonwealth, Her Majesty travels extensively. Much of this travel is to island countries.

Her Majesty the Queen has reportedly accepted that a new royal yacht was not necessary for the purpose of royal travel alone, though for some years this has not in fact been the primary function of *Britannia*. She had been used by the royal family an average of 40 days a year. *Britannia* spent 157 days at sea in 1993, with some one-third of total sea-time dedicated to royal duties. Much of the remaining time was pre-positioning for official visits, or time spent on sea days and port visits, themselves important functions.

Although the *Britannia* will be withdrawn from service because her advanced age made her continued operation inefficient, the need for a royal yacht remains. This is the subject of extensive debate, and has seen a number of innovative and novel proposals being put forward. In July 1996 a Parliamentary Committee proposed the construction of a new £80m (NZ\$190m) royal yacht, to be built in a British shipyard by 2000.

Plans for a new royal yacht were announced by the British Government 22 January 1997. The ship would be completed by 2001 or 2002, in time for the fiftieth anniversary of the Queen's accession to the throne. It was to be funded, to a cost of £60m (NZ\$143m), from the contingency reserves of the Ministry of Defence. The Queen would however make a contribution to the cost of furnishings, in the same way that she contributes to the cost of furnishing the private apartments of royal residences. The new yacht would be relatively cheaper than the *Britannia*, which, it was estimated, would cost £70m (NZ\$167m) to build today. The commercial role envisaged for the new vessel, something for which the *Britannia* was not originally designed, would require a more elaborate vessel, and the estimate is perhaps £20m (NZ\$47m) too low.

The procurement programme was to be managed by the Ministry of Defence. A year-long Ministry of Defence feasibility study this year was to examine the requirements of the new ship. The outline specification was to be drawn up, and this would be the basis for inviting tenders for the construction stage.

The yacht would have no wartime military role, nor would it have another primary role, as this, in the view of the Ministry of Defence, would not fulfil the "representational" role of a royal yacht. As with all earlier royal yachts, the crew would be provided by the Royal Navy, and would number about 150. It was anticipated that the annual running cost would be £5m (NZ\$12m), half the cost of the *Britannia*. Proposals for commercial funding of the construction costs were rejected as inappropriate. However, the previous commercial experiment, the *Britannia* sea days, would continue, and be given greater prominence. Suggestions that the new royal yacht might be a sailing vessel were rejected by the Government.

The cost of the proposed new royal yacht can be compared to the cost of a Type 23 (*Duke*-class) frigate, which displace 4,500 tonnes full load, and carry 150 crew, yet cost some £130m (NZ\$310m) each. The royal yacht would be much cheaper to build, and considerably cheaper to run, because of the absence of the full-range of weapons and equipment carried on a warship.

Most significantly, the contribution to the defence of the realm that the royal yacht would make would be more significant than a single frigate could ever achieve. In terms of sheer presence a royal yacht has a significant advantage over any single warship, except perhaps an aircraft carrier.

After the new Labour Government took office in the United Kingdom in May 1997 the royal yacht replacement programme was subject to review, as were all other capital projects. Plans for a replacement ship have effectively been abandoned, in favour of refitting the old royal yacht. It has been suggested that this could take the form of a £50 (NZ\$120m) refit, funded by private capital, to extend the life of the yacht by another 20 years. She would be chartered by commercial users for up to 70 days at a time. When required as a royal yacht, a use which would have priority, the commercial backers would receive appropriate fees.

While such an option would have the benefits of preserving the *Britannia* and saving the British Government the cost of a replacement yacht, it remains unclear that it is practical. A decision on replacing the yacht would merely be deferred. At the end of the 20 years the

Britannia would be approaching 70 years of age, a true Methuselah amongst ocean-going ships. Continuation of her life beyond 2020 would be unlikely.

A royal yacht adds immeasurably to the significance of a naval good-will visit, and is a prestigious venue for receptions on state or official visits. Additionally, through hosting business seminars and sea-days, a royal yacht can generate considerable revenue, something which no ordinary warship can achieve.

A royal yacht is not a vital necessity, but as an extension of policy it is invaluable. Britain remains a major maritime nation, and a sea-going royal yacht is the best advertisement of this status.

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Alternative role

Although it has been said that the royal yacht, whether new or a rebuild, will not have a military role, and the intention seems to be to give her an enhanced commercial role, there certainly are alternative roles suitable for a royal yacht. As a royal yacht would not be required for extended periods, there are a number of other roles, apart from hosting sea days, which could be met at other times.

As the royal yacht carries the Queen, who, as well as being Sovereign, is Lord High Admiral, the *Britannia* had already acted as a flagship. Whilst it would not be practical to fit the full range of command control intelligence and communications equipment necessary for the new royal yacht to act as an operational flagship, there is no reason why it could not be designated as a peacetime flagship for limited purposes, such as training cruises.

This raises the possibility of using the ship as Royal Naval College training ship. In the second term of naval general training at Britannia Royal Naval College Dartmouth, officers under training join the Dartmouth training ship for a training cruise. During the course of the cruise young officers work their way around the various specialist departments of the ship. A ship operating in the role of the Dartmouth training ship is never operational whilst carrying officers under training, so there would be no risk of the royal yacht becoming involved in active operations.

Until 1972 a Dartmouth Training Squadron, consisting of a number of frigates, took cadets on training cruises. From the late 1970's to the early 1980's, the amphibious ships *Fearless* and *Intrepid* took turns to carry cadets, until frigates were again given the role. Neither types of vessel were specifically designed or fitted for this task, though the *Fearless* with 600 crew, and accommodation for 400 Royal Marines, had space readily available for young officers.

The destroyer HMS *Bristol* was converted in 1984-6 for service as a dedicated training cruiser. Although she was expected to be used in this role for fifteen years, she was only operational between 1987 and 1991. HMS *Bristol* carried 400 crew, in addition to 100 midshipmen on the nine week training cruise. Although with a slightly reduced war role, she could still act as flagship for Flag Officer First Flotilla when required for observing naval exercises.

In 1991, *Bristol* was confined to a harbour-only role. The first batch of the *Broadsword*-class frigates were given the midshipman training role. The four ships carried 65 officers under training on training cruises until they were sold off in 1995-7.

While frigates can be used to give officers sea-going experience, there are advantages in using a dedicated ship, especially one large enough to carry a significant number of specialist

officers. Any new midshipman training ship would also have to be sufficiently well-equipped to adequately represent the widest range of equipment found on modern naval vessels. All functional departments were well represented on HMY *Britannia*, except weapons engineering. As on aircraft carriers, and HMS *Bristol*, on *Britannia* the Heads of Departments were commanders, and many Special Duties officers were borne. The environment on the *Britannia* would have been suitable for training midshipmen in most of the skills required of officers.

The rebuilt royal yacht could be used as a midshipman training ship. Training cruises are relatively short, and are scheduled well in advance, as are royal visits. There would be no insurmountable difficulty in using the yacht as a training ship when not required as a royal yacht, just as the *Fearless*-class were used as training ships when not required as amphibious warfare ships.

Such a dual role is not unprecedented overseas. The French navy midshipman training ship is the helicopter carrier *Jeanne d'Arc*. In peacetime she carries 182 officers under training on six-month training cruises. In times of tension or war she would carry anti-submarine helicopters.

Thailand has chosen the expedient much used in Britain between the world wars, and has fitted their new light aircraft carrier, the *Chahri Narubot*, with royal apartments. Delivered early in 1997, and with 600 crew, she is designed to carry 10-12 AV-8S Harrier attack aircraft, and 10-15 Sea King anti-submarine helicopters. It remains to be seen whether such a composite ship will prove a success in the role of royal yacht, though experience in Britain would suggest that such a compromise is rarely successful.

The combination of operational aircraft carrier and royal yacht risks a conflict of roles; a combined training ship and royal yacht should be much less risky, because the training programme is planned far in advance. Operational exigencies which might affect an aircraft carrier are unlikely to affect a training ship.

The *Britannia's* long-standing role of hospital ship was the only role for an operational naval vessel which was legally non-combatant. However, this requires that the ship not be fitted with cryptographic machines, nor carry ciphers or codes. These are however necessary on a royal yacht. If converted to the role of hospital ship, the *Britannia* would have been declared to the International Red Cross, and painted with the appropriate markings. In the Gulf War 1990-91 the RFA *Argus* fulfilled this role, and the *Britannia* never served as a hospital ship, either then or in the earlier South Atlantic conflict.

There might be advantages in giving a royal yacht an alternative war-time role, but the cost or inconvenience of conversion tends to make it impractical. It makes more sense to give the yacht a secondary, peace-time role, such as training ship. This would not be an operational naval role, nor would it in any way reduce the prestige value of the yacht. The reduced likelihood of a major war also makes a secondary peace-time role more practical than a secondary war role.